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# Imagining the Americas Lesson

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# Content



## INTRODUCTION

Through its focused attention on key works of art and design, this lesson offers students the opportunity to investigate the changing context of the Americas through objects and representations made in North, Central, and South America and in the Caribbean from pre-contact to the present. Consider the perspectives and experiences of indigenous peoples as well as European colonists and investigate the historic and ongoing impact of colonialism, local and international trade and cultural exchange, industry and immigration. Students are encouraged to act as historians by using these works of art as primary sources to investigate aspects of daily life, the environment, identity, culture and politics.

Students look closely at a single object or compare artifacts, shift their attention from details to the whole, and synthesize observations of the object with the broader context that produced it. The questions and activities encourage students to consider and ask thoughtful questions about making, use, and meaning in relation to historical objects and their own contemporary worlds, as well as in making hypotheses about how the political, social, religious, and economic ideas embedded in these works have shaped the way peoples across the Americas think, act, and create.

Highlighted here are key objects you can use to generate in-depth investigations. Appropriate for an entire class or for small-group or self-guided learning, each object analysis provides relevant information, possible discussion questions, and suggestions for writing, making, and doing. You can choose a single artifact or a sequence of works; project or print out images; learn about one object for a presentation or to lead a discussion; and choose or customize discussion questions and activities that address your teaching goals and learning objectives.

Part Two of this lesson will include objects and representations from Central and South America and the Caribbean.



# Tankard

**Paul Revere, American, 1735–1818**

**Tankard**, 1700–1799

Silver

Height: 23.5 cm (9 1/4 inches)

Mary B. Jackson Fund 32.193



## About the Work

Paul Revere is best known for his patriotic activities during the American Revolutionary War (1775–1783) and for his skills as a silversmith. The son of a silversmith born in France, Revere lived in Boston, a major center of silver production and innovation in colonial America and the home of many eminent 18th-century silversmiths worked in the 18th century. During this period, affluence could be measured as much in silver possessions as in coin, so silver was used to create beautiful objects that also signified wealth. Skilled silversmiths, newly immigrated, brought their craft to American clients seeking functional objects that would convey their owner's status and sophistication.

Theft in the colonial era was common, but fine silver provided some degree of financial protection for the growing class of wealthy elite—the presence of a maker's mark or the owner's coat of arms or initials easily allowed officials to determine the proper ownership of stolen goods. This tankard is engraved with the Jackson family coat of arms on the front of the body, the owner's initials (J.J.A.) on the handle, and Revere's maker's mark on the bottom.

The silversmith gave special attention to the tankard's manufacture and design, as it was intended to be used and appreciated by contemporaries participating in the popular ritual of social drinking. Unlike more everyday pewter tankards, which may have been cast away after several years of use, this silver one would have been especially valued for its materials and craftsmanship. Formed using thin sheets of silver that were cut, shaped, hammered, and finished with hand tools, the tankard is characterized by restrained elegance. Its appearance exemplifies a new movement that brought simplicity, symmetry, refinement, and regularity to the decorative arts. This was in response to the extravagant ornamentation of Rococo design found at the time in English decorative objects in particular. Revere's craftsmanship is demonstrated by the pinecone finial at the top, the scroll handle, and the exceptionally delicate engraving. Like Revere, other American designers saw in these new forms and their

emphasis on simplicity a distinct new American style, especially as tensions rose between Britain and the colonies in the years preceding the American War of Independence.

## Discussion Questions

What does Revere's tankard tell us about American values in the late 18th century? What are some of the tankard's details that support your claims?

## Writing/Making/Doing

To imagine what it might have been like to design a form like this tankard, have your students carefully draw just the outlines of the vessel on a piece of paper. Next, to get an idea of the style Revere's tankard was moving away from, show an image of a piece of silver made in the Rococo style, such as this ornate [cake basket](#), and it with compare the tankard.

Discuss the similarities and differences between these two approaches in terms of the attention to surface decoration and the general form of each object.

To explore 18th-century colonial America's social class and structure, ask students to invent a context or life for this tankard by writing a one-page story in which the tankard is used. Who might have commissioned and owned it? In what situations might it have been used? What does it reveal about the owner's social/economic status and values? To inspire brainstorming, consider [Moses Gill](#), the subject of this painting by John Singleton Copley, as the possible owner of the tankard.

To focus on the significant economic role silver an object such as this tankard played in colonial America, imagine what it would have been like to work as a silversmith during that time. For families that could afford silver wares, silversmiths made household items such as spoons,

forks, cups, thimbles, and combs by hand by cutting, shaping, and hammering thin sheets of silver using anvils, hammers, and chasing hammers to form details. To help students understand the steps involved in manufacturing a small object, they can watch this [video](#). As students consider the life of the silversmith, take into consideration that many silversmiths in the Boston area, like Revere's father, had emigrated from countries such as France and England. Set students to work in teams to brainstorm and design persuasive advertisements for a tankard like this one. Have teams use words, pictures, or both to attract potential customers.

### Further Reading

Revere tankards: [www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/8218?=&imgNo=0&tabName=related-objects](http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/8218?=&imgNo=0&tabName=related-objects)

[www.kellscraft.com/EarlyAmericanCraftsmen/EarlyAmericanCraftsmenCh09.html](http://www.kellscraft.com/EarlyAmericanCraftsmen/EarlyAmericanCraftsmenCh09.html)

[www.collectorsweekly.com/articles/the-huguenot-silversmiths-18th-century-refugees/](http://www.collectorsweekly.com/articles/the-huguenot-silversmiths-18th-century-refugees/)

# Desk and bookcase 6

**Attributed to John Goddard, cabinetmaker, American, 1723–1785**

***Desk and bookcase*, 1760–1785**

Mahogany, cedar, tulipwood, pine and chestnut

256.5 x 106.7 x 61 cm (101 x 42 x 24 inches)

Bequest of Mr. Charles L. Pendleton 04.042



## About the Work

In the colonial and early Federal eras, the parlors of American homes often served as multi-purpose spaces for dining, socializing with friends, and conducting business transactions. The furniture used in these mixed-use rooms, such as this Rhode Island-made desk and bookcase, was designed to take on many functions. This piece provided its owners with a place to write as well as a locked safe that held the ledgers and records for the family business. It also may have stored books, money, valuables, weapons, or silverware.

Cabinetmakers in Providence and Newport, Rhode Island, became renowned in the late 18th century for incorporating shells and other natural forms into their furniture, creating uniquely American works of art that at the same time were stylistically similar to pieces favored by wealthy English homeowners. Such innovations allowed American patrons to purchase American-made furniture that matched pieces purchased in Europe. This particular example stands out not only

because it is one of the few six-shell desk and bookcase combinations from the era still in existence, but also because of the expense of the mahogany wood used to make it.

## Discussion Questions

This one object was made to serve multiple functions in an 18th-century New England parlor. If you owned this piece of furniture, what would you use it for? In today's homes and classrooms, various types of furniture do the things this one piece can do. What are some examples of contemporary furniture with multiple purposes?

The exterior of the desk and bookcase is made of imported mahogany wood, while the interior is made of inexpensive woods such as cedar, pine, and chestnut. To learn more about the trade and use of mahogany, ask your students to investigate the sources for this valuable resource.

Where was it produced? How it was cultivated and traded? How did this affect the environment and the communities involved?

Between 1760 and 1790, it is likely that the craftsmen who constructed this desk and bookcase made a total of four of them, one each for the four brothers—Nicholas, Joseph, John, and Moses—in the Brown family of Providence. What might this say about the Brown family? How could they afford to pay for these expensive desks? In what businesses might the family have engaged? Discuss your reasons, then research to find the answers.

The Townsend-Goddard business, a collaboration between two families, is one example of how furniture was designed and made in the 18th century. In our own times, there are countless objects produced through collaborations between designers, makers, and manufacturers. Ask students to brainstorm a list of products that can be made collaboratively. Then, ask them to choose one product to research the different roles of the designers and makers involved, and the nature of their collaboration.

### Writing/Making/Doing

Think about what pieces of furniture could be combined to make one large multi-purpose piece. What material would you use so that the piece is both profitable to make and affordable for your clients? To whom would you market it, and how? Make a sketch of your design.

### Further Reading

*Bulletin of the Rhode Island School of Design*, vol. XXVI, no. 1. Providence: RISD, 1938.

Christopher P. Monkhouse, Thomas S. Michie, and John M. Carpenter. *American Furniture in Pendleton House*. Providence: Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, 1986, 97–101.

Charles Rappleye. *Sons of Providence: The Brown Brothers, the Slave Trade, and the American Revolution*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006.



# Portrait of the Honorable Moses Gill and Sarah Prince Gill

**John Singleton Copley, American, ca. 1738–1815**

***Portrait of the Honorable Moses Gill, Esq.*, 1764**

***Portrait of Sarah Prince Gill*, 1764**

Oil on canvas

126.4 x 100.3 cm (49 3/4 x 39 1/2 inches)

Jesse Metcalf Fund 07.1187 and 07.118

## About the Work

Unlike their European contemporaries, 18th-century Americans had more opportunity for upward mobility, and portraiture offered one way for upper-class colonial men and women to fashion their images and make a statement about their social positions. John Singleton Copley, the premier portrait painter in Boston at the time, was known for his accuracy in describing facial features, yet he often manipulated other aspects of his portraits—including costume, props, and setting—to convey his subjects' social aspirations.

In Copley's portrait of Moses Gill, the light shines most brightly on Moses's midsection, bringing attention to his silk waistcoat and protruding belly, both of which, as markers of class status, position the subject in the elite sector of American society. The portrait depicts an affluent married man and hardware merchant whose political career is about to begin. Sarah Prince Gill, Moses Gill's first wife, is presented in an idealized outdoor setting. She sits against a rocky ledge holding a leather-bound book, which suggests her religious upbringing and interests. The daughter of a Boston minister, Sarah was known for her diligent study, her religious devotion, and her thoughtful personality. The painter probably presents Sarah in invented costume, meaning she probably did not own or even pose in a dress like this one. In his commissioned portraits, Copley often embellished the truth, portraying his American sitters in the finest European fashions.

## Discussion Questions

Describe Moses Gill's pose, facial expression, and clothing. What do they communicate? What clues are we given about Gill's age, status, and personality? What exactly do they tell us about him? Consider the same questions about Sarah Prince Gill's portrait.

What does this image tell us about notions of white male and female identity in 18th-century colonial America? What values are expressed in these two portraits?

John Singleton Copley was the premier portrait painter for the Boston colonial elite. What might his painting style and ways of working tell us about American aspirations in the 18th century?

## Writing/Making/Doing

To explore how we present and represent ourselves, have your students create portraits. Ask students to brainstorm and make a list of ways they can present themselves before they begin working. To help students consider what it means to portray another person, pair students to create portraits of each other. This exercise might work best for younger students or students who are comfortable working together in pairs, especially in visual arts. The sitter can choose the setting of their portrait, what they will wear in it, and any objects they want to include to convey their identity. The maker of the portrait can work with the sitter to find an appropriate pose and expression and to determine the props (if any) and composition. Make sure to let students know that the goal is to focus on the pose, props, and setting, rather than to achieve a realistic portrayal.

To give students a better sense of what life as an 18th-century American colonial elite might have been like, have them write a journal entry of a day in the life of Sarah Prince Gill or Moses Gill using what they know about life in the colonies and what they've discovered about Sarah and Moses through their portraits.

## Further Reading

Carrie Rebor, Paul Staiti, Erica E. Hirshler, Theodore E. Stebbins Jr., and Carol Troyen, with contributions by Morrison H. Heckscher, Aileen Ribeiro, and Marjorie Shelley. *John Singleton Copley in America*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1995.

Maureen C. O'Brien. "The Reluctant Wife," in *Manual: a journal about art and its making*. Sarah Ganz Blythe (ed.), issue 1, Fall 2013 (Providence: Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design): 18–32. Available online at [http://risdmuseum.org/manual/80\\_inaugural\\_issue\\_of\\_manual\\_a\\_journal\\_about\\_art\\_and\\_its\\_making](http://risdmuseum.org/manual/80_inaugural_issue_of_manual_a_journal_about_art_and_its_making)



# Punch Bowl with Cantonese Hongsg

## Chinese

### **Punch Bowl with Cantonese Hongsg**, 1785–1800

Porcelain with enamel

15.2 x 36.8 x 36.8 cm (6 x 14 1/2 x 14 1/2 inches)

Gift of Mrs. Hope Brown Russell 09.343



## About the Work

In the Federal period (which spanned the late 1770s to the 1820s), when this bowl was made and used, punch was not the mixture of juice and soda we serve at parties today. At that time, it was a mixture of multiple alcohols, fruit juice, and tea first concocted by European and American sailors and based on similar medicinal drinks in India.

Consumption by the middle and upper classes of imported goods such as tea, coffee, and chocolate increased in America after the Revolutionary War, necessitating new vessels and customs for their preparation and consumption. In the same way, the social ritual of drinking punch also demanded large new vessels for serving it to party guests in fine parlor rooms. To fill this need, porcelain punch bowls were created in China specifically for the American market. This particular punch bowl depicts trade by foreign merchants in China. The images of this activity are made by Chinese artists for American consumers.

Under the Navigation Acts of 1651, the North American British colonies were forced to purchase Chinese exports from the British East India Company rather than trading with China directly. After the Revolutionary War, a new class of American merchants was eager to enter this lucrative trade, supplying a growing American middle class with a variety of goods, including fine objects and textiles, that symbolized wealth, taste, and cosmopolitan refinement.

This porcelain punch bowl depicts 18th-century warehouses along the Pearl River in the Chinese city of Guangzhou, formerly named Canton. Before the 1830s, Canton was the only Chinese port open to foreign merchants. There, American merchants traded such goods as anchors, cannon shot, bar iron, sheet copper, ginseng (an herb growing wild in New England which was prized for medicinal purposes by the Chinese), tar, spermaceti candles, Jamaican and New England rum, and Madeira wine and brandy. In return, the American merchants sought Chinese silks, lacquerware, porcelain, tea, and opium.

In Canton, multi-story warehouses called hongsg served as offices, trading floors, dining areas, and sleeping quarters for ship captains and their crews. Seven hongsg are depicted on the bowl; the countries

that owned the hongsg (the United States, England, Denmark, France, Holland, Spain, and Sweden) are identifiable by their flags. Because North American ships did not reach Canton until 1784, this punch bowl could not have been created earlier than 1785. Here in Providence, John Brown (1736–1803), the well-known shipbuilder and slave trader, entered the China trade in 1787. His company participated in the flurry of shipbuilding, sending ships that traveled between Narragansett Bay and Canton, bringing back objects like this one.

## Discussion Questions

The bowl depicts the American flag alongside the flags of established European nations. What does this representation suggest about how Americans perceived their new role in world trade, or their aspirations?

In what ways can international trade benefit a fledgling nation? To answer this question, consider, for example, the goods that were exported to China and imported to America in the 18th century. What does America export to other nations today? What does America import now, and from which countries? Ask students to research key moments in international trade in American history and plot a timeline from the 1600s to the 21st century.

The punch bowl was made by Chinese artists for an American audience. It is, in fact, a unique record of the encounter of different peoples. Ask students to go to [http://risdmuseum.org/manual/on\\_the\\_other\\_side](http://risdmuseum.org/manual/on_the_other_side) and use the zoom feature to examine the bowl carefully. What is recorded in the scene, and how it is shown? Consider the built environment, the placement of the figures and the activities they are engaged in, and other details. Also discuss how scale and

viewpoint are used, and how these affect our perception of the city and people depicted.

The following text, written about 50 years after punch bowl was made, describes a similar scene in Canton from an American perspective:

*Fancy a building twelve hundred feet long by from twenty to forty feet broad, and in some portions of it fifty feet high, built of brick, with its floor as level as a rope walk. These hongts are of one story, in some places open to the sky, and so long that at the end of one of them the human form diminishes, and we see beings engaged in occupation, and we hear no noise, for they steal along like shadows. Here are immense scales for weighing tea; here are tables placed for superintendents, where the light falls in through the roof; far from these again are foreigners inspecting a newly arrived chop; at the extreme end is the little apartment where the tea merchant receives men upon business; and through the high door beyond, we see the lively river and a chop boat waiting, ready for the cargo. In one part of the building a second story is added, for immense suits of beautiful rooms, furnished with costly elegance, and adorned with rarities and articles of virtue. We wonder what all these chambers are meant for where no one appears, and we learn that they are merely for show and the occasional reception of guests. Here is a door that leads out on to the roof. Below us is the river, with its myriads of beings and boats; on our right the public square, with the standards of America, England, and France; opposite is the verdant island of Honam, with its villages, its canals, and its great temple. On our left is another vista of river life, the fort of Dutch folly, and behind us the dense city. We descend and find in one of the pretty rooms that some servant, who has vanished, has placed the most aromatic of tea for us upon a superb table.*

Osmond Tiffany, *The Canton Chinese: Or, The American's Sojourn in the Celestial Empire*, 1849

What does this account reveal about American experiences in China? What is the narrator's focus? How are the setting, activities, and people described? Compare the text with the punch bowl. How are these two depictions similar? How are they different?

### Writing/Making/Doing

Different decisions are made in designing drinking vessels. To learn more about the design process, first have students brainstorm a list of different kinds of drinking vessels. Then ask students to analyze one vessel's common form and essential parts. How large is the bowl or body of the vessel? What is the shape—shallow and wide, tall and narrow, or some other form—and why? Does it have a handle? If so, where is the handle placed, how is it shaped, and why? Does the vessel have a stem? What material is this vessel typically made from, and why?

Now apply your analyses to a larger body of work. Some good examples to look at together are the ancient [Greek kylix](#), the [Mycenean rhyton](#), the [Bohemian glass goblet](#), the [silver tea and coffee set](#), and the [20th-century German teacup](#). Brainstorm what each vessel tells us about the beverage it was designed for and the surrounding social customs of the likely owners.

Finally, using this new understanding, have students design a vessel for their favorite beverage. Encourage them to consider the shape and material of the vessel as a way to positively accentuate the smell, taste, and visual presentation of the drink.

The punch bowl was made from porcelain. Ask students to answer the following questions: What is porcelain? How is porcelain made? Why was it so prized in the 18th century? They can find out the answers by researching different aspects of the history of porcelain production in China as well as its later history in Europe. As a starting point, read the information about the manufacture of porcelain in China provided here: [http://risdmuseum.org/manual/on\\_the\\_other\\_side](http://risdmuseum.org/manual/on_the_other_side). To learn about the efforts of European manufacturers to learn the secrets of porcelain production from Asian makers, read pages 4 and 5 here: [http://risdmuseum.org/manual/133\\_exhibition\\_notes\\_meissen\\_recast](http://risdmuseum.org/manual/133_exhibition_notes_meissen_recast).

### Further Reading

*Selected Works*. Providence: Museum of Art. Rhode Island School of Design. 2005. 192.

Amanda Elizabeth Lange. *Chinese Export Art at Historic Deerfield*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan/Historic Deerfield, 2005.

*Early American Trade with China*. Online resource. (<http://teachingresources.atlas.uiuc.edu/chinatrade/introduction04.html>.)

David Wondrich. *Punch: The Delights (and Dangers) of the Flowing Bowl*. New York: Penguin, 2010.



# Landscape (Landscape with Tree Trunks)

**Thomas Cole, American, 1801–1848**

***Landscape (Landscape with Tree Trunks)*, 1828**

Oil on canvas

66.4 x 81.9 cm (26 1/8 x 32 1/4 inches)

Walter H. Kimball Fund 30.063

## About the Work

By 1828, when Thomas Cole completed this painting, much of the East Coast of the United States was inhabited by people of European heritage, and nature was being destroyed to make room for industry. A resident of New York City, Cole would have seen this industrial boom firsthand, although many of his paintings, including this one, depict vast, untamed wilderness with minimal signs of human intervention.

Cole was highly critical of the political changes happening on the eve of Andrew Jackson's presidency, and he sought to counteract the greed of American expansion by focusing on the purity of nature. Here, within the grand, powerful landscape, he includes a lone Native American pointing westward. Cole held a mystical, romantic vision of American Indians as being more attuned to the natural world, and he anticipated the loss of their cultures along with the loss of their land.

## Discussion Questions

Ask your students to brainstorm a list of words describing the mood of this landscape, then have them consider the following questions: How does Cole's treatment of the clouds and sky contribute to the mood? What geologic and natural features does Cole emphasize, and how do they affect the mood?

Cole made many nature studies in the Hudson River Valley that he later completed as paintings in his New York City studio. Based on your analysis, which parts of the scene might have been observed in nature, and which elements or treatments may have been added later for their symbolism?

The Native American appears at the top of the waterfall in the center of the painting. Why might Cole have included this figure, and what does the inclusion tell us about how he viewed the relationship between Native Americans and nature?

The evolving idea of manifest destiny was promoted by President Andrew Jackson and others to support the zealous purchase and consumption of land and natural resources, fueling nostalgia for an American "uncorrupted" by industrialization and urbanization.

To build an understanding of how paintings of American landscapes helped Americans define the character of their new nation, ask students to compare the mood created in Cole's paintings with the following excerpt from Alexis de Tocqueville's influential book *Democracy in America* (1835/1840), in which de Tocqueville described America's exceptional characteristics:

It is this consciousness of destruction, this *arrière-pensée* of quick and inevitable change, that gives, we feel, so peculiar a character and such a touching beauty to the solitudes of America. One sees them with a melancholy pleasure; one is in some sort of hurry to admire them. Thoughts of the savage, natural grandeur that is going to come to an end become mingled with splendid anticipations of the triumphant march of civilization. One feels proud to be a man, and yet at the same time one experiences I cannot say what bitter regret at the power that God has granted us over nature.

Landscape painting did not become a major source of interest to American artists until the early 1800s—in Cole's time, painters of landscapes were just beginning to find an audience for their worthy subject. Ask students to consider this information, as well as the following excerpt from Cole's "Essay on American Scenery." How does this help us understand Cole's sense of his own role as an artist? What does it contribute to an interpretation of the painting?

There are those who regret that with the improvements of cultivation, the sublimity of the wilderness should pass away; for those scenes from which the hand of nature has never been lifted, affect the mind with a more deep toned emotion than aught which the hand of man has touched.

## Writing/Making/Doing

Having spent the first 17 years of his life in the industrialized county of Lancashire, England, Cole was keenly aware of the effects of the Industrial Revolution. In America, he took trips to the Catskills of New York and the White Mountains of New Hampshire as he sought to capture areas of wilderness before they were marked by human presence. To acknowledge the constantly changing landscape of our world, have students draw or paint part of their own town as it might have looked 200 years ago.

In 1830, just two years after this painting was finished, President Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act, which paved the way for the forcible relocation of thousands of Native Americans from the southeast United States. When Cole painted this scene, indigenous people were also being driven from the northeast, yet Cole included an image of a Native American, perhaps as a symbol of what was lost in the Industrial Revolution and European settlement. Ask students to research the history of an indigenous tribe in their geographical area and write about what happened to that tribe during and after European settlement, and what that tribe's presence is today.

### Further Reading

<http://www.explorethomascole.org/>

Thomas Cole. "Essay on American Scenery," in *American Monthly Magazine* 1 (January 1836).

(<http://www.tc.umn.edu/~danp/rhet8520/winter99/cole.html>).

Angela Miller. "Thomas Cole and Jacksonian America: The Course of Empire as Political Allegory," in *Critical Issues in American Art*. Edited by Mary Ann Calo. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998.

Christine Stansell and Sean Wilentz. "Cole's America," in *Thomas Cole: Landscape into History*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994.





# Fire-Engine on Broad Street, Elizabeth, New Jersey

**Ernest Oppen, American, fl. 1889–1900**

***Fire-Engine on Broad Street, Elizabeth, New Jersey*, ca. 1889**

Oil on canvas

92.1 x 121.9 cm (36 5/16 x 48 inches)

Museum Works of Art Fund 43.005

## About the Work

In this painting, German immigrant Ernest Oppen depicts the city of Elizabeth, New Jersey, which by the late 19th century was becoming, like many other American cities, increasingly industrialized. Between 1880 and 1900, the populations of American cities rose 15%. Much of this growth was related to international immigration. In New Jersey, as elsewhere in America, new immigrants worked in growing urban industries. Elizabeth was home to industries including the Singer Sewing Company, as well as one of the first car companies, the [Electric Carriage and Wagon Company](#). Two of the century's most popular inventions came into being just a few miles away in Menlo Park, where Thomas Edison invented the phonograph in 1877, followed in 1879 by his modified incandescent light bulb.

## Discussion Questions

Look carefully at this painting. What kind of place is Elizabeth, New Jersey? What are your clues? Consider the businesses along the street and the activities depicted. How do the figures inhabit the space, and how do they relate to each other? What kinds of people do you see, and what differences or similarities do you notice? Where are people placed, and what does their placement tell us about how they might feel?

A relatively recent innovation in Oppen's day, the popular phenomenon of photography may have influenced how Oppen chose to depict this scene. This painting contains a very specific sense of motion—the running posture of the man in gray, the horses in mid-gallop, the smoke's horizontal trail—as time appears to be frozen or slowed. What do you think is implied or insinuated by this depiction of motion? How might it suggest a sense of progress?

## Writing/Making/Doing

In his composition, Oppen foregrounds the paved road and the whizzing fire engine, both symptomatic of the industrialized city, while the people are dwarfed atop the receding sidewalk. Have students compose a city or streetscape in which they foreground one or two elements that define or represent current innovations in American society—whether technological, political, or otherwise.

Ask students to choose one figure from Oppen's painting and imagine that figure's perspective in more detail by writing a first-person or third-person narrative. For example, how might an immigrant or a newcomer to a city feel walking down this street? What might she or he notice? What might be the viewpoint of the solitary woman in the scene?

The following ethnographic study by the social reformer Jacob Riis, himself an immigrant, relates the experiences of the city dwellers in New York City in 1890. Students can read the accounts as a starting point for research and to consider how observation and viewpoint can substantiate their writing. The excerpt is about a husband and wife living in a German-speaking immigrant neighborhood in New York City:

*A man with venerable beard and keen eyes answers our questions through the interpreter, in the next house. Very few brighter faces would be met in a day's walk among American mechanics, yet he has in nine years learned no syllable of English. . . . In all that time he has been at work grubbing to earn bread. Wife and he by constant labor make three thousand cigars a week, earning \$11.25, when there is no lack of material; when in winter they receive from the manufacturer tobacco for only two thousand, the rent of \$10 for two rooms, practically one with a dark alcove, has nevertheless to be paid in full. And six mouths to be fed. He was a blacksmith in the old country, but cannot work at his trade here because he does not understand "Engliska." If he could, he says, with a bright look, he could do better work than he sees done here. It would seem happiness to him to knock off at 6 o'clock instead of working, as he now often has to do, till midnight. But how? He knows no Bohemian blacksmith who can understand him. He should starve. Here with his wife he can make a living at least. "Aye," says she, turning, from listening, to her household duties, "it would be nice for sure to have father work at his trade." Then what a home she could make for them and how happy they would be. Here is an unattainable ideal, indeed, of a workman in the most prosperous city! There is a genuine, if unspoken pathos in the soft tap she gives her husband's hand as she goes about her work with a half-suppressed sigh.*

Jacob A. Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York*, New York: Dover Publications, 1971, 111–112

The second quote is by a man recollecting the experience of street life in New York City in the late 19th century:

*Back in 1880, it was wise to watch where you walked. Horse-drawn trolleys provided the main form of transportation and pollution it seemed. Horses can produce 20 to 30 pounds of manure a day. Multiply that times a couple thousand, and you've got quite a mess. By the 1890s, electric streetcars had replaced horse-drawn vehicles, running above or below ground to avoid the crowded streets. After Henry Ford introduced his Model T car in 1908, a pedestrian soon had to dodge not only the streetcars, but also a new urban menace--the automobile. Strangely enough, paved streets came about late in the century at the urging of bicyclists, not the automobile drivers.*

"City Life at the Turn of the 20th Century," Eye Witness to History, [www.eyewitnesstohistory.com](http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com) (2000)

#### Further Reading

Jacob A. Riis. *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York*. New York: Dover Publications, 1971, originally published by Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1890.

# Summer

**Frank Weston Benson, American, 1862–1951**

***Summer*, 1909**

Oil on canvas

91.8 x 113 cm (36 1/8 x 44 1/2 inches)

Bequest of Isaac C. Bates 13.912



## About the Work

Frank Benson's depiction of a warm summer day on the coast of Maine is overtly and symbolically linked to the beauty of the women relaxing on the seaside cliffs. The landscape and figures are connected through Benson's palette and his handling of paint so that they almost become one. Note, for instance, that the women's dresses are composed of the same whites, blues, and pinks in the sky, water, and land.

In 1900, almost 20% of women were in the workforce, although paintings of early 20th-century women engaged in work outside the home are very rare. At the turn of the century, artistic depictions of women were most often limited to their role as aesthetic objects in an environment of wealth and leisure; their beauty, like that of nature, was considered a source of artistic inspiration. The casual poses of the women in Benson's painting suggest that they are content; however, one woman gazes out over the ocean, perhaps indicating a desire to see beyond the confines of her world.

## Discussion Questions

What is the mood of this painting? How does Benson's choice of color and painting style contribute to the mood? What other elements affect the mood?

Describe the young women's appearance. Based on your observations, what can you tell about their lives? How do you think they spent their time?

Examine the gaze and posture of the woman who is standing. What do you think she's looking at? How might you interpret her position in light of your knowledge of women's lives at the turn of the 20th century?

## Writing/Making/Doing

In 1899, American author Kate Chopin wrote this in *The Awakening* about her protagonist Edna Pontellier:

*Even as a child she had lived her own small life all within herself. At a very early period she had apprehended instinctively the dual life—that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions.*

Consider how this quote relates to the women in this painting and to women's lives more broadly. Drawing on their detailed observations of the figures and setting of this painting, have your students write a dialogue for these young women spending an afternoon by the sea, based on what they know about the lives of women at this time.

To explore ways women are presented and perceived in the 21st century, have students find and analyze an image of a group of women from a current magazine, TV show, or movie. Working in groups, they should discuss their analyses to each other, noting any commonalities in the way women are portrayed now with how they are portrayed in Benson's painting.

## Further Reading

"Exploration and Retrenchment: The Arts in Unsettling Times, 1890–1900" (ch. 11), in *American Encounters: Art, History, and Cultural Identity*. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2008.

# Negro Head

**Nancy Elizabeth Prophet, American, 1890–1960**

***Negro Head***, before 1927

Wood

52.1 x 27.9 x 35.6 cm (20 1/2 x 11 x 14 inches)

Gift of Miss Eleanor B. Green 35.780



## About the Work

The artist who made this powerful portrait updated the form of the classical bust on a pedestal through her innovative use of materials. By choosing to use wood instead of the more expensive and commonly used marble, and by leaving her tool marks visible, Nancy Elizabeth Prophet made the physically demanding work of carving apparent. Through the expression depicted on the face and the choice of materials and process, *Negro Head* conveys hard work, struggle, and determination, reflecting the African American experience in the 1920s, a time when racial segregation and discrimination were enforced by law or by practice in many parts of the United States.

The bust may also tell us something about the artist, a woman of Native American and African American ancestry born in Warwick, Rhode Island. The first Black graduate of RISD, Prophet won the Harmon Foundation's prestigious Otto Kahn Prize for *Negro Head* in 1929. She enjoyed recognition for her work during her travels in Paris and as a member of the faculty at Spelman College in Atlanta, yet she struggled to secure financial support at crucial times and spent a significant amount of time sick, hungry, and poor. Prophet herself noted that the stern, unwavering, and focused expression in *Negro Head* represented her own "determination and aggressiveness" as an artist.

## Discussion Questions

Describe this sculpture. What clues suggest this man's age, status, and personality? What does this tell us?

Discuss the style of the sculpture and the materials Prophet used. How does her choice to work in wood, revealing her carving, affect how we perceive the subject she portrays? Imagine if Prophet had chosen marble or another stone and polished away the visible marks. How would the work's appearance and meaning be different?

Discuss the title of this sculpture. What did the word *negro* mean in the 1920s? What does it suggest today? What does the title tell us about the man depicted? What does his anonymity add to our understanding of the artist's decision to make his portrait in the form of a bust?

When Prophet sculpted this piece, racial segregation was enforced by law in many parts of the south, while other forms of discrimination affected people of color elsewhere in the United States. How does this knowledge of the social and political climate in America during the 1920s inform your interpretation of this sculpture?

Speaking about another of her sculptures, Prophet explained that everything she had done "embodied an experience, something she had lived or its result." What struggles might Prophet have encountered as a woman artist of African American and Native American ancestry in the 1920s? How might this sculpture reflect those challenges?



### Writing/Making/Doing

Prophet's husband of 15 years, Frances Ford, was the model for the sculpture, although Prophet chose not to use his name in the work's title. Having looked at the work closely and thought about Prophet's life and times, consider what might have shaped her decision about the title. To explore the importance of a title in the interpretation of a work of art, ask students to propose other titles for this sculpture, then discuss how their suggestions reflect their understanding of the work and might shape others' perceptions.

To investigate the expressive nature of portraiture, ask students to write a monologue from the subject's point of view, set in the 1920s in New England and based on their interpretation of Prophet's depiction.

### Further Reading

Amalia K. Amaki. "Nancy Elizabeth Prophet: Carving a Niche at Spelman College and Beyond," in *Hale Woodruff, Nancy Elizabeth Prophet, and the Academy*. Atlanta, Georgia: Spelman College Museum of Fine Art: 2007.

# Building More Stately Mansions

**Aaron Douglas, American, 1899–1979**

***Building More Stately Mansions*, 1944**

Oil on canvas board

50.8 x 40.6 cm (20 x 16 inches)

Purchased with the Frederick Lippitt Bequest 2008.30



## About the Work

Intended as a study for a larger painting, *Building More Stately Mansions* provides a rich record of Aaron Douglas's artistic process. He breaks the flat canvas into three distinct regions, contrasting the large, static, multi-dimensional architectural forms of the background with the dark, flat human silhouettes in the foreground. The muted earth tones of the background further energize the faceless but active figures. As they ascend or rise from triangular mounds suggesting rock, dirt, and rubble, the figures grip or cluster around tools, as if both their past and present work were the construction of the monuments behind them.

A range of architectural forms are depicted here, including a skyscraper, arches, a ziggurat, a church spire, and a pharaonic head. These refer not only to the Americas, but to the longer history of human civilization, and specifically to the anonymous but often skilled contributions of laborers forced to build the empires that would dominate them. To clarify the relationships between the foreground and background, and between the past and the present, Douglas paints two contrasting bands of color along the middle plane, suggesting the continuity of cultural memory and the passage of time.

Best known during his lifetime as an illustrator and a muralist, Douglas was formally trained as a landscape and portrait painter. During the 1920s and 1930s, he developed a distinct technique blending Egyptian figurative abstraction and West African sacred geometry with Cubist and Art Deco concepts within a color palette of muted earth tones. His illustrations for novels, pamphlets, poems, and magazines, as well as his murals for the New York Public Library and historically black colleges and universities around the country, were well known during the Harlem Renaissance and Great Depression.

These stylized representations of Africans and Americans of African descent in gestures of dignified labor inspired pride in communities that still remembered the indignities and exploitations of slavery.

## Discussion Questions

How would you describe the mood of this painting? What details in the work help you articulate your position?

Though the study includes imagery drawn from past eras, Douglas's title is in the present tense. What might this dichotomy suggest?

In the larger work created after this study, the dark, curvilinear line here that begins in the bottom left corner and skims the shoulders and heads of the silhouettes has been taken out. Why do you think Douglas might have made that choice?

## Writing/Making/Doing

Douglas celebrates the neglected and often anonymous contributions of black, African, and other laborers of color. Ask students to list jobs that go unnoticed. Is there a pattern in the kinds of work these include? How would they propose to celebrate the people who perform those jobs?

Aaron Douglas moved to New York in 1925, at the height of the Harlem Renaissance. There he became a collaborator and a friend to many of the great writers, intellectuals, performers, and visual artists of his day. To further understand the relationship between Douglas's work

and that of other prominent persons within the Harlem Renaissance, consider the following exercise, which helps students make connections between literature and objects.

Below are eight quotes from various literary sources. Project *More Stately Mansions* at the front of the classroom or print copies to distribute to students. Divide students into groups and give each group one of the quotes. Have students read the quote silently, then have one member read it aloud to other members of their group. Give each group ten minutes to reflect, discuss, and write down how the quote impacts their individual ideas about the painting. During an additional ten-minute block, challenge each group to collaborate to write four to six sentences showing how their quote helps them interpreting the painting. At the end of this time, have each group share their quote and their interpretation with the class.

1. *The American Negro must remake his past in order to make his future. Though it is orthodox to think of America as the one country where it is unnecessary to have a past, what is a luxury for the nation as a whole becomes a prime social necessity for the Negro. For him, a group tradition must supply compensation for persecution, and pride of race the antidote for prejudice. History must restore what slavery took away, for it is the social damage of slavery that the present generations must repair and offset. So among the rising democratic millions we find the Negro thinking more collectively, more retrospectively than the rest, and opt out of the very pressure of the present to become the most enthusiastic antiquarian of them all.*

Arthur Schomburg, *The Negro Digs Up His Past*, March 1925

2. *Build thee more stately mansions, O my soul,  
As the swift seasons roll!  
Leave thy low-vaulted past!  
Let each new temple, nobler than the last,  
Shut thee from heaven with a dome more vast,  
Till thou at length art free,  
Leaving thine outgrown shell by life's unresting sea!*

From Oliver Wendell Holmes's poem *The Chambered Nautilus*, 1895

3. *African sculpture has been for contemporary European painting and sculpture just such a mine of fresh motifs, just such a lesson in simplicity and originality of expression, and surely, once known and appreciated, this art can scarcely have less influence upon the blood descendants, bound to it by a sense of direct cultural kinship, than upon those who inherit by tradition only, and through the channels of an exotic curiosity and interest. But what the Negro artist of to-day has most to gain from the arts of the forefathers is perhaps not cultural inspiration or technical innovations, but the lesson of a classic background, the lesson of discipline, of style, of technical control pushed to the limits of*

*technical mastery. A more highly stylized art does not exist than the African. If after absorbing the new content of American life and experience, and after assimilating new patterns of art, the original artistic endowment can be sufficiently augmented to express itself with equal power in more complex patterns and substance, then the Negro may well become what some have predicted, the artist of American life.*

Alain Locke, *The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts*, 1925

4. *With nearly every great European empire to-day walks its dark colonial shadow, while over all Europe there stretches the yellow shadow of Asia that lies across the world. One might indeed read the riddle of Europe by making its present plight a matter of colonial shadows, speculating on what might happen if Europe became suddenly shadowless—if Asia and Africa and the island were cut permanently away. At any rate here is a field of inquiry, of likening and contrasting each land and its far-off shadow.*

W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Negro Mind Reaches Out*, 1925

5. *It's because you are young—  
You do not understand.  
[...]  
You are too young to understand yet.*

*Build another skyscraper  
Touching the stars.  
We sit with our backs against the tree  
And watch skyscrapers tumble  
And stars forget.*

*Solomon built a temple  
And it must have fallen down.  
It isn't here now.*

*We know some things, being old,  
You do not understand.*

Langston Hughes, *Being Old*, 1951

6. *I am a Negro:  
Black as the night is black,  
Black like the depths of my Africa.*

*I've been a slave:  
Caesar told me to keep his door-steps clean.  
I brushed the boots of Washington.*

*I've been a worker:  
Under my hand the pyramids arose.  
I made mortar for the Woolworth Building.*

Langston Hughes, *Negro*, 1925

7. *Art must recover and reveal the beauty which prejudice and caricature have overlaid.*

Alaine Locke, from *The New Negro*, 1925

8. *I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me...You wonder whether you aren't simply a phantom in other people's minds. Say, a figure in a nightmare which the sleeper tries with all his strength to destroy... Invisibility, let me explain, gives one a slightly different sense of time, you're never quite on the beat. Sometimes you're ahead and sometimes behind. Instead of the swift and imperceptible flowing of time, you are aware of its nodes, those points where time stands still or from which it leaps ahead. And you slip into the breaks and look around. That's what you hear vaguely in Louis' [Armstrong's] music.*

Ralph Ellison, Prologue, *Invisible Man*, 1952

### Further Reading

Selected Works. Providence: Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, 2005, 247.

Amy Helene Kirschke. *Aaron Douglas: Art, Race, and the Harlem Renaissance*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1995.

"Social Visions: The Arts in the Depression Years, 1929–1941" (ch. 16), in *American Encounters: Art, History, and Cultural Identity*. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2008.





**Paul Revere, American, 1735–1818**

***Tankard*, 1700–1799**

Mary B. Jackson Fund



**Attributed to John Goddard, cabinetmaker, American, 1723–1785**

***Desk and bookcase*, 1760–1785**

Bequest of Mr. Charles L. Pendleton





**John Singleton Copley, American, ca. 1738–1815**  
***Portrait of the Honorable Moses Gill, Esq.*, 1764**  
Jesse Metcalf Fund





**John Singleton Copley, American, ca. 1738–1815**

***Portrait of Sarah Prince Gill*, 1764**

Jesse Metcalf Fund





**Chinese**

***Punch Bowl with Cantonese Hongs*, 1785–1800**

Gift of Mrs. Hope Brown Russell



**Thomas Cole, American, 1801–1848**

***Landscape (Landscape with Tree Trunks)*, 1828**

Walter H. Kimball Fund





**Ernest Oppen, American, fl. 1889–1900**  
***Fire-Engine on Broad Street, Elizabeth, New Jersey*, ca. 1889**  
Museum Works of Art Fund





**Frank Weston Benson, American, 1862–1951**

***Summer*, 1909**

Bequest of Isaac C. Bates





**Nancy Elizabeth Prophet, American, 1890–1960**

***Negro Head***, before 1927

Gift of Miss Eleanor B. Green





**Aaron Douglas, American, 1899–1979**  
***Building More Stately Mansions*, 1944**  
Purchased with the Frederick Lippitt Bequest

**Teaching Notes** was developed by Mariani Lefas-Tetenes, Sarah Laperle, and Horace Ballard, staff in the Education Department, and interns Jonathan Migliori and Victoria Charette, in collaboration with Providence Public School teachers and students.

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